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ABSTRACT

This paper describes strategies for establishing and maintaining safe schools. A "safe school" is one with physical features, layout, and policies that are designed to minimize the disruptions and intrusions that interfere with the school's mission. Above all, safe schools enjoy a climate that is free of fear. To establish safety, orderliness, and caring, school officials must take several steps. First, they should form a committee that consists of stakeholders from all perspectives, a move that will enhance understanding and agreement about what needs to be done. The committee should then set in motion the process of needs assessment with reference to current levels of safety, orderliness, and caring. Attention should focus on the school's physical features, layout, policies, and procedures that are in place to handle daily activities, as well as problems that may arise. A school's climate is often assessed in terms of students', teachers', school staffs', and parents' perception of how safe the school is. Do students, for example, feel safe? One way to assess school safety is to consider the three "Ps" of safe schools: place, people, and purpose. Paying special attention to each of these components can help a school establish and maintain safety, orderliness, and caring. (RJM)

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How to Establish and Maintain Safe, Orderly, and Caring Schools.

Joanne McDaniel

2000

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HOW TO ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN SAFE, ORDERLY, AND CARING SCHOOLS

Safety, orderliness, and caring in schools today cannot be assumed but must instead be explicitly addressed. The Center for the Prevention of School Violence views the establishment and maintenance of these conditions in schools as essential in efforts directed at creating excellent schools. With these conditions present, students are given the opportunity to perform at their best academically, and teachers are provided with environments which allow them to perform at their best.

A "safe school" is one whose physical features, layout and policies and procedures are designed to minimize the impact of disruptions and intrusions that might prevent the school from fulfilling its educational mission. It is characterized by a climate that is free of fear. The perceptions, feelings, and behaviors of members of the school community reveal that the school is a place where people are able to go about their business without concern for their safety. An "orderly school" is one characterized by a climate of mutual respect and responsibility. Students relate to each other and to teachers and school staff in acceptable ways. Expectations about what is acceptable behavior are clearly stated, and consequences for unacceptable behavior are known and applied when appropriate. Students and staff feel responsible for the successful operation of the school. A "caring school" is one which is inviting and supportive of students and staff. Students and staff are provided with opportunities to relate to each other in appropriate ways. The perceptions, feelings, and behaviors of members of the school community reveal that the school is a place where people are comfortable, feel welcome, and are able to be successful. The safety, orderliness, and caring found in any school overlap, but delineating them enables better understanding of what is necessary to establish and maintain these conditions in schools.

In order to establish safety, orderliness, and caring, school officials should take several steps. They first should form a committee which consists of stakeholders from all perspectives, the community at-large, parents, school administration, teachers, and students. Involving all perspectives will enhance understanding and agreement about what needs to be done. Drawing upon the expertise which exists in the community, from law enforcement, for example, is of critical importance. Parental involvement enables the concerns of parents to be considered. Including all of the stakeholders from within the school helps bring to light the different experiences these stakeholders encounter on a daily basis.

The first task of the committee is to set in motion the process of needs assessment with reference to current levels of safety, orderliness, and caring. From this initial assessment, the committee should

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gain knowledge of what strengths and weaknesses exist with reference to safety, orderliness, and caring. From this knowledge, a safe school plan should be developed. This plan should be directed specifically at maximizing the school's levels of safety, orderliness, and caring. The establishment of baseline measures for safety, orderliness, and caring should be part of the plan. These measures should be standardized for all schools, but there should be additional school-specific measures to enhance the validity of the standardized measures.

To address the safety of a school, attention should be focused upon the school's physical features, layout, and policies and procedures which are in place to handle daily activities as well as problems that may arise. The buildings and grounds of the school should be assessed. Access to the school should be reviewed, and policies, procedures, and technological devices, such as alarms and surveillance cameras, should be considered to minimize intrusions from outsiders. Also addressed should be intrusions that may threaten security because of what is brought to school; firearms and other weapons exemplify this type of intrusion. Daily communication procedures as well as procedures which should be followed when security is breeched also should be given attention.

Determining if a school is safe begins by making sure that the above considerations are evidenced in the safe school plan and the school's implementation of the plan. Has the physical environment of the school been reviewed? Have access policies and procedures been established and are they being implemented? What types of intrusions are taking place at the school? Are there trespassers? Have there been break-ins or acts of vandalism? Have firearms or weapons been brought to school? Answers to these questions initially provide baseline indicators for safety, and over time the numbers of occurrences of these types of activities provide measures of how safe a school is.

Additionally, the safety of a school should be addressed by reviewing the "climate" in the school. A school's climate is often assessed in terms of how safe students, teachers, school staff, and parents perceive the school is. Perceptions of safety and feelings about safety reveal important information about a school's climate. Do students feel safe at school? Do teachers? Do parents perceive that the school is safe? Do these feelings and perceptions translate into behaviors which reveal that the school's climate is believed to be unsafe? For example, are certain areas of the school avoided because of fear? Do students stay home from school because they feel unsafe?

Obtaining answers to these questions with surveys can help determine how safe a school is. Initially survey results will provide baseline measures which will highlight safety concerns. The safe school plan can then be developed to address these safety concerns, and steps can be taken to address them. Repeated surveys will allow determination of progress with reference to the concerns as well as allow for continuous monitoring of a school's climate. Additional measures, such as absentee rates, may also aid in measuring school climate.

The orderliness of a school involves how students relate to each other and to teachers and school staff. An environment characterized by respect and responsibility for others is important as is a clear delineation of what is expected from students with reference to behavior. Student behavior is a critical component of the orderliness of a school. A school's safe school plan should include a clear set of such expectations. Consequences for failing to fulfill these expectations need to be made clear, and

procedures need to be established and implemented to ensure that order is maintained.

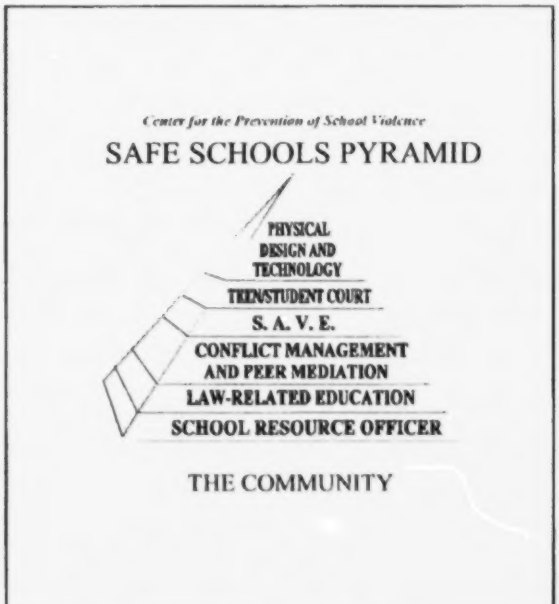
Determining if a school is orderly involves examining measures which reflect how well students behave. Baseline indicators of the orderliness of a school include the reasons for and the number of referrals to the office and the numbers of in-school and out-of-school suspensions. With this information, actions can be taken to address the reasons for disorder. The impact of these actions can be examined through continuous monitoring.

An environment of caring in a school involves how inviting and supportive of students, staff, parents, and other interested members of the community the school is. Opportunities exist for everyone to actively participate in the school in positive ways. There is a sense of school community that is identifiable to those who are members of the school community as well as to those who visit.

How caring a school is can be determined by surveying students, staff, parents, and community members. Such surveys importantly reveal perceptions, feelings, and behaviors concerning the degree of caring a school provides.

Whether focusing upon safety, orderliness, or caring, the potential actions a school may implement in its efforts to create the best possible learning environment are numerous. Some of these actions may specifically address one of the conditions, but most provide benefits which overlap the conditions. The Center's Safe Schools Pyramid provides some guidance to schools about the kinds of actions which can be taken to address the different conditions.

The Pyramid reflects what can be described as the "Three P's" of safe schools: place; people; and purpose. The "Three P's" relate to the conditions of safety, orderliness, and caring as well as to the reason schools exist in the first place, education.



Actions which schools may take to enhance safety are addressed by those strategies in the Pyramid which address "place." These specifically are "physical design and technology" and the "School Resource Officer." The strategy of paying attention to the physical design of a school as well as implementing technology to help secure it is directly linked to safety. A School Resource Officer (SRO), because of his/her expertise, can help in the security assessment of the school and in the development and implementation of policies and procedures related to safety Both of these strategies may enhance the safety of the place which is the focus

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of attention, the school.

Additional actions which schools may take to enhance safety are addressed by those strategies in the Pyramid which address "people." How safe the people in schools feel may be enhanced through the presence of an SRO. Additionally, students who learn to deal with conflicts with other students in acceptable ways, for example, through conflict management and peer mediation, likely will feel safer. Likewise, students who feel they can participate in making themselves safer, through involvement in Students Against Violence Everywhere (S.A.V.E.), for example, will also feel safer. All of these strategies focus upon how people are critical actors in establishing and maintaining safety in schools.

People also are critical actors in the orderliness or lack of orderliness in a school. The Pyramid offers, again, the SRO and conflict management and peer mediation to help address the orderliness of a school. In addition, the teaching of law-related education and the implementation of teen/student courts aid in establishing and maintaining orderliness because of the emphasis each places on consequences which result when inappropriate behavior occurs.

People, of course, are what caring in a school is all about. The Pyramid's recognition of the community as the context from which it rises as well as the people orientation of strategies such as SROs, conflict management and peer mediation, and S.A.V.E. provide opportunities for the caring condition of a school to be enhanced.

Each of the strategies which comprises the Center's Safe Schools Pyramid can contribute to a school's effort to establish and maintain safety, orderliness, and caring. With these conditions established and maintained, the third "P" of the Center's Pyramid, the purpose of schools, education, can be realized. Students and teachers do not have to worry about their safety. Instead they can concentrate their efforts on education. Teachers can teach and students can learn. Schools can be environments which are free of fear and conducive to learning. With such environments in place, educational excellence can be achieved.

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